

FACTSHEET



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HORSE SAFETY: SADDLING, BRIDLING & RIDING WESTERN

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(Replaces *Horse Safety: Saddling, Bridling & Riding Western*, Order No. 87-023)

There are more than 325,000 horses in Ontario and more than 750,000 in Canada. Of the 325,000 Ontario horses, approximately 30,000 are involved in the racing industry. The remaining horses are in non-racing activities, including a large number whose owners ride western, either in competition or for recreation.

The following information will provide some ideas on how to make every ride a safe and enjoyable experience with your horse. Riders must practise safety and good judgment in routine horse handling.

Safety starts with a dependable horse. The younger and less experienced the rider is, the older and more experienced the horse should be. The highest risk combination is a two-year-old horse and a beginning rider, "learning together." No parent should ever consider buying an unbroken horse for a beginning-rider child so they can grow up together. This is an accident waiting to happen.

Be sure the equipment used is equal to the occasion. It should always be in good repair. Check the rigging of your saddle to be sure it is strong and will hold the cinch straps without danger of breaking. Worn fenders are likely to chafe the sides of a horse. Check bridles, especially the reins, and curb straps for strength.

SADDLING

Saddle the horse in a quiet, safe location. Tie the horse in cross-ties or, at least, with his head so that he cannot graze. The horse's mind should be on being saddled. Ensure that there are no distractions or scary objects, such as tractors going by. The area should be clear of all obstacles, including brooms, pitchforks and tack.

Ensure the blanket is free from dirt and foreign objects, such as burrs, straw and twigs. Place the blanket forward of the withers and then pull it into position. This pulls

the hair backward in the direction it should lie. This is likely to help prevent a sore back. A sore back causes discomfort and may encourage a horse to buck. Be sure there are no wrinkles in a folded blanket.

When carrying the saddle, approach the horse on the left side (near-side). Have the right stirrup and the cinches laid back over the seat of the saddle (see Figure 1). This does two things: it keeps the rider from stepping on the cinches when approaching the horse and it prevents these items from hitting the horse's right (off-side) leg or ribs as the saddle comes down on his back. Raise the saddle as high as you can and let it down gently on the back of the horse. Ensure that there are no leathers caught under the saddle.



Figure 1. Proper placement of right stirrup and cinches on saddle.



Figure 2. The saddling process is a bruising experience for this horse. In future, he may look for ways to avoid being saddled. (Drawing by Dawn Peace)

Move to the opposite side, well back from the heels of the horse to let the cinches down. Then let the stirrup down. Moving to the off-side allows you to inspect the position of all the leathers on that side. Don't try to release these by pushing them over the saddle from the near-side. This may cause the horse to buck or rear or, at least, might bruise the horse's ribs and front leg (see Figure 2). Once the leathers on the off-side are in place and the position of the blanket is checked and/or adjusted, move back to the near-side of the horse.

On the near-side, reach under the horse with your left hand to catch the front cinch. Always fasten the front cinch first, then the rear cinch if there is one. Place the cinch strap into the cinch ring or buckle. On girths with a ring, pass the cinch strap through the ring from inside to outside and then up to the ring on the saddle.

Tie a cowboy knot in this ring (see Figure 3). Lay any extra cinch strap flat under the stirrup fender with the end coming back up to the keeper ahead of the cinch ring.

To tighten the cinch, place the left hand under the cinch buckle/ring to prevent pinching and pull the cinch strap up — firm but not too tight — with the left hand still in this position. The cinching process will be finished later.

Reach under again with your left hand to fasten the back cinch. Leave enough room between the back cinch and the belly to allow for the flat of the hand to be placed under the cinch freely when it is buckled. A back or rear cinch should not be so tight that it contacts the horse's body when he inhales, nor should it be so loose that he might catch his back foot in it.

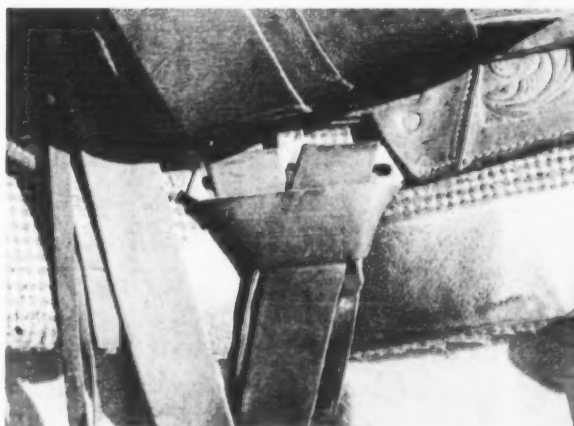


Figure 3. Cowboy knot.

After the horse stands awhile, recheck the front cinch, (see Figure 4). It can probably be taken up another hole or two (inch or two) without getting it too tight. The flat part of your hand should fit under the cinch at the buckle without difficulty.

Secure the end of the cinch strap through the keeper. Although most straps are not long enough to get stepped on, keep them up out of the way and not blowing against the legs or belly in strong breezes.

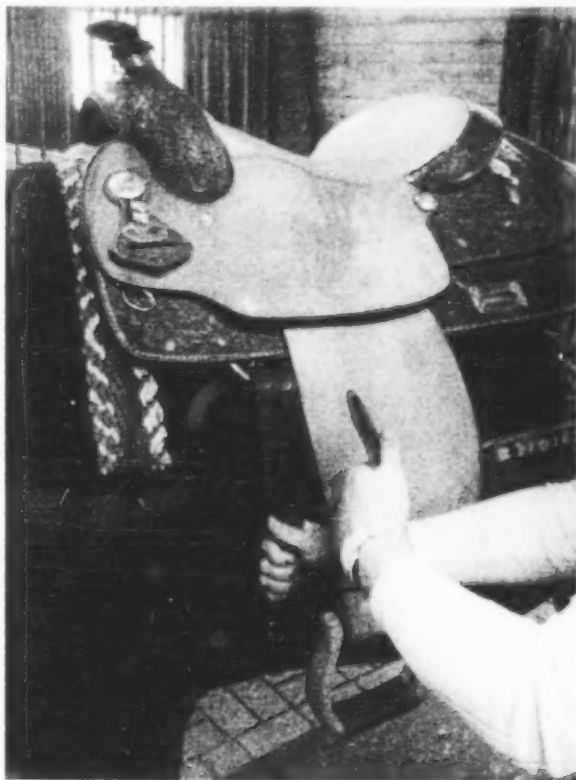


Figure 4. Rechecking the cinch.

Attach the martingales now if they are of the clip-on type. Remember, when unsaddling, undo them first.

Before mounting, it is a good idea to stretch the horse's front legs forward to bring any skin and hair ahead of the girth. To do this, stand in front of the horse but slightly to the side, reach down to the pastern and have the horse allow you to stretch each front leg forward. Be a little cautious the first few times; some horses will rear if they don't understand what you are attempting to do.

Unsaddling is the reverse of saddling. Unhook the martingale first, if one is used. Then unhook the back cinch before the front cinch. The horse may show extreme reactions to the saddle that turns when only the back cinch is in place.

BRIDLING

Bridling a horse safely starts with untying the horse. Don't leave the halter attached to cross-ties. Drop the nosepiece of the halter off the nose and refasten the crown strap around the neck. This provides something to hold on to if the horse attempts to move.

Spread the crown of the bridle with the right hand and grasp the bit in the left. It may be better to keep the reins in the left hand or over the left arm to keep them up out of the dirt and out from under the feet of the horse and handler (see Figure 5).

Approach the mouth of the horse with the bit in your left hand. Keep cheek pieces and headstall out of the horse's eyes. If you are tall enough, you may reach over the neck of the horse to do this. The objective is to get the bit in the horse's mouth without bruising the eyes with the cheek pieces or banging the teeth and gums with the bit.

With the bit pushed lightly against the teeth, insert the left thumb behind the incisors to encourage the horse to open his mouth. A well-trained horse will often open his mouth as the handler approaches this position, before actual contact is made with the thumb.

Lift the bridle upward as you gently feed the bit between the incisor teeth. Next, move the crown of the bridle over the right ear by bending it forward. Be careful. Don't drag the cheek pieces into the horse's eyes. Insert the left ear carefully. Go around to the right side of the horse and ensure that the bridle is properly in place before fastening the throat latch.

Be sure the bridle is properly adjusted to fit the horse before you ride. Check three points: placement of bit, adjustment of curb strap, and adjustment of throat latch. The throat latch and curb strap should give adequate room but not be too loose.

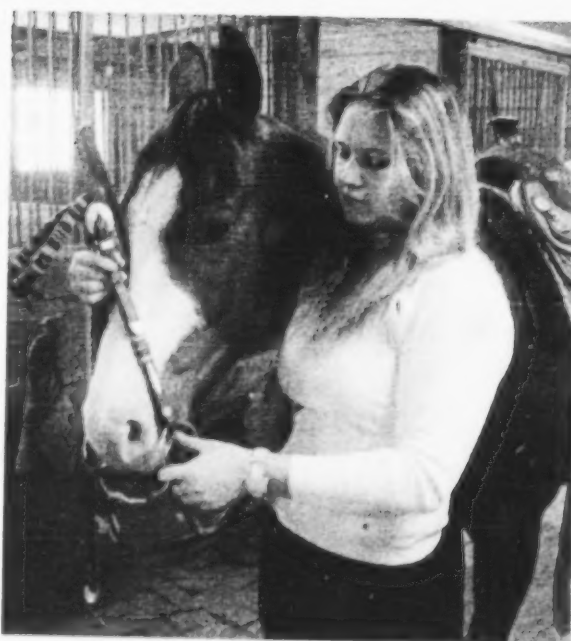


Figure 5. Proper bridling technique.

Stand in front of the horse. The bit should be high enough in the mouth to create a small wrinkle on each side of the gums. If there are two or three wrinkles, the bit may be too high.

WHAT TO WEAR

Often a person's first exposure to riding is leasing a horse at one of the riding-horse establishments. Your attire should include a safety helmet and boots with high heels. In Ontario, riding-horse establishments are mandated by law under the *Horse Riding Safety Act*, 2001, (c.4, s.2 (1)) to ensure that any rider under the age of 18 years, riding any horse, "has and is correctly using the following equipment in the manner that it was designed to be used:

1. A helmet that meets current standards for equipment designed and manufactured for use while riding horses as established by the American Society of Testing and Materials (ASTM), the British Standards Institute (BSI) or the European Safety Standards.
2. Hard-soled footwear with a heel of no less than 1.5 cm.
3. Tack properly fitted on the horse."

In addition, under the *Highway Traffic Act*, R.S.O. 1990 (c. H.8), no person under the age of 18 years shall ride or be mounted on a horse on a highway unless that person has and is correctly using the following equipment in the manner that it was designed to be used:

- A helmet that complies with the requirements under the *Horse Riding Safety Act*, 2001.
- Footwear that complies with the requirements under the *Horse Riding Safety Act*, 2001.

For personal safety, wear boots and a safety helmet, regardless of your age. Heeled boots with high insteps are designed to prevent getting hung up in the saddle stirrups. A boot with a flat heel may have a high instep, but the heel is not as safe for riding. Running shoes are not acceptable.

Dress for riding. Shorts are not acceptable. Long pants provide protection against abrasion from the saddle as well as prickly brush. Pants without a seam along the inner thigh are more comfortable than jeans and less likely to chafe. In rough brushy terrain, chaps will give protection, but be cautious of the straps at the top. They occasionally hang up on the saddle horn. Vests and loose blouses can also be problematic if they get hung up on the horn.

Stirrups with a standard 2-inch tread are used by most riders. They accommodate the rider who uses the ball of the foot in the stirrup as well as one who rides on the instep. Deeper stirrups are for roping. They are designed to help a cowboy dismount with speed after roping a calf and are not recommended for pleasure riding. The depth makes it easy for a small foot to go through and hang up. An oxbow stirrup is used by most cutting-horse riders. The feet are "home" or all the way forward in the stirrup. Boots should have strong arch supports for these stirrups.

MOUNTING

Before actually trying to mount, a good practice is to tie the reins to the saddle horn with some slack in them and release the horse into a round pen. By driving him from the ground in the round pen, the rider can get a feel for the horse's attitude for the day and estimate his reaction to being ridden.

It is preferable to mount in an enclosure such as the round pen or an exercise ring. Check the area where you are mounting. Stay away from buildings, fences, trees, objects on or in the ground, rough or slippery footing and other horses. People, dogs and highway traffic may cause your horse to "spook." Be prepared.

Before mounting, recheck the cinch to be sure it is not too loose or too tight. If the horse is fat with mutton withers (round shoulders) and the saddle is narrow at the gullet, the saddle may turn as the rider mounts. The use of a breast collar will aid in preventing the saddle from rolling to the side.

To mount safely, pull the slack out of the reins, hold them in your left hand and grab a piece of mane ahead of the saddle. With your right hand, twist the stirrup facing you to receive the left foot. Watch your horse. If he wants to wander away or start moving, say whoa, pull on the reins and have him stand in place.

With your left foot in the left stirrup, take one hop on the right foot. Aid your rise into the saddle by grasping the horn or pommel with your right hand. Restrain your horse if he wants to move forward. Be sure your left toe is not pushing into the horse's foreleg. Stand straight on the left leg in the stirrup. Raise your right foot and leg well over the rump of the horse; don't drag your foot on his rump. This causes anxiety in young horses and triggers older ones to move off before you are seated in the saddle.

Have the right stirrup trained to receive the rider's foot. This is done by "blocking" the stirrups. To do this, place the saddle on a saddle rack or sawhorse, dampen the stirrup leathers and place a broom handle between the twisted stirrups. When the leather is dry, the stirrups should remain in place facing forward. The rider should not have to fish with his or her right foot around the area of the horse's foreflank for this stirrup.

Bear weight in the stirrup with the right foot before dropping into the saddle. Don't drop into the saddle and then fish for the stirrup. Such actions will sometimes trigger a cold-backed horse to buck. Also, be in command of the reins. If the horse tries to charge forward, don't allow him to lower his head to buck. Teach the horse to stand during mounting, until asked to move off.

RIDING

Initially, choose an area the horse is acquainted with for riding. The use of a round pen or small arena helps in control and reducing energy prior to riding off. Feel the horse out in familiar surroundings. If there is any bucking tendency, it will come early after mounting with most horses. When the horse is quiet, he is ready to go out and field ride or ride in any manner desired.

When riding on a road in Ontario, be sure to ride in the direction of the traffic. When being overtaken by a faster moving horse or vehicle, move as far to the right as possible.

To be safe, dismount when crossing pavement or hard road surfaces, because of their slickness. This is particularly true when they are wet or if there are oil spots on them. When crossing hard-surfaced roads, do so at a walk. Allow adequate time to cross between speeding vehicles.

Horses see scenery differently than humans. Horses are colorblind and see only varying amounts of reflected light in a drab mosaic landscape. They may "spook" or show fear at strange objects.

A rider should acquaint the horse with each situation without increasing his fear. Urge a horse gently up to the object of his fear. Don't punish him. Give the horse time

to see and smell. Speak quietly. If a horse is hurried or whipped, the original fear will be reinforced and the reaction to the next experience worsened.

When riding with a friend, ride side-by-side if the terrain allows it. This is better for visiting and is safer for the horses. Horses that crowd each other or travel close together in a line may tend to get kicked.

If riding in a group, remember that horses don't like to be left behind. For example, if one person drops behind to close a gate, his or her horse will become anxious to catch up. In this case, it is a good idea to wait for all of the party before starting away. Young horses are particularly impatient when left behind because of their natural herding instinct. Some may even panic.

When riding a trail single file, keep one horse length between. If riders tailgate or ride up on the rear of another horse, the rider and/or horse may be kicked, or one horse may step on the other horse's heels and substantially injure them.

Don't canter by a rider at the walk unless you know the other horse is well-trained. The nature of a horse is to panic and join the group when other horses start to run. This evolutionary trait saved their lives from prehistoric predators. It is not uncommon for young, green horses to panic and buck when other riders gallop by if they are not allowed to join in the chase.

Riding double is a common practice, and perhaps most horses should allow this activity. However, it is not as safe as it looks. Be sure the back rider is an experienced rider before letting them mount behind you. If a horse shows anxiety from a rider behind the saddle, the

tendency is to squeeze in with the legs. This flanks the horse and worsens a bad situation.

Few riders need spurs or are adept in using them. They should not be used for dress. Indeed, they should be used only for a specific purpose, and sparingly at that. Although it may be stylish to put spurs on youngsters whose feet come only partway down the side of a horse, the tendency is for these spurs to gouge the ribs of the animal and create an unsafe situation.

Clowning and horseplay increase the probability of accidents. Good riders seldom feel a need to exhibit their horsemanship skills by clowning. It actually may show just the opposite, in addition to encouraging accidents. Always sit with legs on either side of your horse unless riding sidesaddle.

Allow your horse plenty of time and a loose or free rein when crossing obstacles. Horses have different sight mechanisms than humans. A loose rein allows the horse to lower and raise his head to judge height and distance. It also allows him to improve balance with his head and neck.

Don't hurry a horse over rough ground. Give him time and a loose rein. This allows the horse to pick his footing much more safely than if held on a tight rein and urged at speeds that don't allow time to adjust if he steps on a rolling rock.

Don't allow the horse to run back to the barn. This creates anticipation for being turned loose and will make the animal "barn-sour." A good idea is to walk back the last one-quarter mile at the end of the ride. This also allows both the rider and horse to catch their breath and savour the last few moments of the ride.

REFERENCES

Horse Riding Safety Act, 2001.

http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/DBLaws/Statutes/English/01h04_e.htm

Highway Traffic Act, R.S.O., 1990, c. H.8.

http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/DBLaws/Statutes/English/90h08_e.htm#BK27

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